

The Role of the Peruvian Guerrilla in Che Guevara's Continental Guerrilla Project

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The Peruvian guerrillas of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN, National Liberation Army) played a key role in Che Guevara's continental guerrilla project. When Guevara left from Africa, his idea was to strengthen this organisation that was supposedly fighting in the department of Ayacucho. After the defeat of this guerrilla in 1965 he turned his eye on Bolivia. The Peruvian guerrillas of the ELN maintained their importance in Guevara's project as evidenced by their attempts to build a guerrilla force nearby the border of Bolivia. This article sheds light on the role of the Peruvian ELN in Che Guevara's continental guerrilla project.

Keywords: Bolivia, Che Guevara, ELN, guerrilla, Peru, Puno.

It is a known fact that one of the main objectives of Che Guevara's guerrilla in Bolivia was to serve as a catalyst and a training centre for guerrilla struggle in the rest of Latin America. However, research on the concrete relation between the Bolivian guerrilla and guerrilla attempts that emerged in other parts of Latin America as a consequence of the struggle in Bolivia are non-existent or are not widely disseminated. This is all the more curious as in Guevara's *Bolivian Diary* one can find passages that talk about the internationalisation of the guerrilla. In addition, also in the communications between Guevara and Havana during the Bolivian guerrilla the international revolutionary dynamics of the guerrilla in Bolivia are recorded (Soria, 2005).

It has been suggested that Che Guevara wanted to launch a guerrilla struggle in Argentina on the basis of the guerrilla columns that were being developed in Bolivia (Debray, 1978: 74–75; Castañeda, 1997: 419; Estrada, 2005: 12; Suárez, Zuazo and Pellón, 2006; Gleijeses, 2007: 171, 237; Anderson, 2010: 643). We consider, however, in accordance with Harry Villegas (1997: 33), one of the surviving fighters of the Bolivian guerrilla endeavour and also known as Pombo, that not only Argentina but also Peru formed part of Guevara's continental guerrilla plans. Surprisingly, the importance of the Peruvian ELN for Guevara's guerrilla project seems to be neglected by the literature on Che Guevara's guerrilla. Well-known biographers of Guevara such as Castañeda (1997), Kalfon (1997), O' Donnell (2003), Taibo (2006) and Anderson (2010) have given scarce attention to the relation between the Peruvian and Bolivian ELN. More specifically, none of these biographers mention the Peruvian guerrilla attempt in the department of Puno, located nearby the Bolivian border, although they should have had access to the communications between Guevara and Havana that refer to this guerrilla

endeavour. Furthermore, in Guevara's *Bolivian Diary* we can even find a reference to the supposed guerrilla intent in Puno. On 2 December 1966, Guevara (1977a: 32) wrote: 'I also decided to provide support for them to send five Peruvians to establish a connection to pass weapons to a region near Puno on the other side of Lake Titicaca'. Of course, their object of study was not the continental guerrilla project of Che Guevara but the man himself. Nevertheless, it is curious to find out that one of the earlier biographies on Guevara mentions the guerrilla intent in Puno (Lavretsky, 1974: 318).

In this article we discuss the role of the Peruvian ELN in the continental guerrilla project of Guevara. The initial objective of Che Guevara was to strengthen the guerrilla struggle in Peru led by the Peruvian ELN in the Ayacucho department. The idea to develop the Bolivian guerrilla emerged after the defeat of the Peruvian ELN in December 1965. This defeat did not imply the end of the role of the Peruvian ELN in Guevara's continental guerrilla project. As a matter of fact, at the same time as the Bolivian guerrilla was constructed attempts were made to build a guerrilla force in the Peruvian department of Puno, near the border with Bolivia. Our arguments are based on a literature review and interviews and correspondence with ex-militants of the Peruvian ELN.

This article is structured in six sections. Section 1 presents Guevara's ideas regarding the necessity of a continental guerrilla struggle. Section 2 provides a brief account of the emergence and evolution of the Peruvian ELN and its relationship with Cuba from September 1962 until its defeat in December 1965 in the Ayacucho department. Section 3 delves into the question of Guevara's main guerrilla objective: Peru or Bolivia. In order to put this issue in perspective, we have included a narrative on supposed relations between the Bolivian guerrilla and guerrillas in Argentina. In section 4 we turn to the discussion regarding the location of the Bolivian guerrilla and in section 5 we describe the intentions of the Peruvian ELN to build a guerrilla in the Peruvian department of Puno, i.e., in the province of Sandia. We present our conclusions in section 6.

The Continental Guerrilla Project of Che Guevara

The development of Guevara's ideas on continental guerrilla struggle dates back to the early 1960s. Ulises Estrada, a Cuban internationalist, writes that from 1961 Guevara began to make plans that should allow him to unleash revolutionary armed struggle in other countries, particularly in Argentina (Estrada, 2005: 12).

In his speech on the occasion of the 152nd Independence Day of Argentina, Guevara (1962) left no doubt that the revolution should have a continental character. He considered the global task of mankind the 'destruction of the monopolistic, imperialistic enemy'.

The need to organise the continental revolutionary resistance, according to Che Guevara (1977b: 247–248), had also to do with the fact that imperialism was preparing the repression of the Latin American peoples. This continental repression should be answered by a continental guerrilla struggle. The more guerrilla fronts were to be opened, the more difficult it would be that these could be fought.

In 1962 Guevara wrote his 'Táctica y estrategia de la revolución latinoamericana'. In this work, which was published in October 1968, Guevara (1977c, 237–238) argues that the United States would do its utmost to destroy the revolutionary power. This would make it difficult that victory could be achieved in an isolated country. Hence, according to Guevara, 'the union of the repressive forces must be answered by the union

of the popular forces. In all countries where oppression reaches unsustainable levels, the banner of revolt must be raised and this banner will have, for historical necessity, a continental character'.

The struggle against imperialism could only succeed, according to Che Guevara (1977d: 367), if it was carried out worldwide because 'imperialism is a world system, the last stage of capitalism, and it must be defeated in a world confrontation. The strategic aim of this struggle must be the destruction of imperialism'. By creating 'many Vietnams', Guevara thought that this could divide the enemy forces. As a tactical step in this struggle, he (Guevara, 1977d: 371) proposed 'the peoples gradual liberation, one by one or in groups: driving the enemy into a difficult fight away from its own territory; dismantling all its sustenance bases, that is, its dependent territories'.

The attack on imperialism in the nations of the Southern Cone should be organised, according to Manuel Pineiro, former Head of the Latin America Department of the Ministry of the Interior of Cuba, on the basis of a guerrilla 'mother column' that was going to be erected in Bolivia. Guerrilla columns that would arise as political 'offspring' of the Bolivian guerrilla led by Guevara, might cause the formation of 'an alliance between the governments and the armies of neighbouring countries, supported by imperialism' and, as a consequence, would help to spread the revolutionary armed struggle in the region (Suárez, Zuazo and Pellón, 2006, 50).

Guevara's continental guerrilla project was, however, not a highly centralised affair. According to Debray (1978: 75), the idea was that the Bolivian core would function as 'a military training centre and political coordination centre for the different national revolutionary organisations of Latin America'. Training in Bolivia would contribute to the multiplication of guerrilla organisations over the continent. In addition, Debray (1978: 76) writes, in many cases all that Guevara's forces had to do 'was to get together, if not physically at least politically, with guerrilla fronts and forces already in existence in outlying areas but needing reinforcement or coordination [...]'.

The Emergence and Evolution of the Peruvian ELN and its Relations with Cuba

The Peruvian ELN was founded in Cuba in September 1962 by, principally, former members of the Partido Comunista Peruano (PCP, Peruvian Communist Party), and Peruvian students. The ex-militants of the PCP had travelled to Cuba to learn from the guerrilla experiences and the students had been invited by the Cuban government to study on the island but impressed by the success of the Cuban Revolution were motivated to organise the guerrilla.

It is important to emphasise the formation of the ELN in Cuba as it helps to understand the specific relationship between the ELN and the Cuban leadership. For this reason it may not come as a surprise that, later on, the Peruvian ELN was completely inserted in Guevara's continental guerrilla project.

The ELN went through three phases. The first one began in 1961 when some former members of the PCP travelled to Cuba in order to prepare themselves for the armed struggle in Peru. This period ends with the first defeat of the ELN in May 1963 in the Peruvian city of Puerto Maldonado. This first phase was organised in cooperation with the Cuban leadership.

The idea was that the Peruvians would travel to La Paz (Bolivia) and from there would cross the border with Peru to establish guerrilla units in the departments of Cerro de

Pasco, Junin and Cuzco. At that time, in these departments, peasant movements fought heavy battles for land (interview, Elías, 2003; interview, Béjar, 2003; interview, Guevara, 2005; interview, Márquez, 2005). In La Paz, Cuba had installed a support base with members of the Partido Comunista Boliviano (PCB, Bolivian Communist Party), the Juventud Comunista Boliviana (Bolivian Communist Youth) and with Cubans such as Ulises Estrada and Orlando Pantoja (interview, Béjar, 2003; Kohan, 2003).

The Peruvian guerrillas did not reach their destination as their vanguard had been surprised by the police in the Peruvian border city of Puerto Maldonado in May 1963. During a gun battle the young Peruvian poet and guerrilla fighter Javier Heraud was killed.

The second phase of the ELN started with a restructuring process and an evaluation of the first guerrilla experience. As part of the evaluation process, ELN cadres Néstor Guevara and Julio Nestor travelled to Cuba to discuss with Che Guevara what had happened in Bolivia and Puerto Maldonado (interview, Guevara, 2005; *Presencia*, 1968). In this phase the guerrilla front named after Javier Heraud was created in the department of Ayacucho in September 1965. This period closed in December 1965 when the organisation was defeated in the province of La Mar.

The decision to continue the guerrilla struggle forced the ELN to do some research. Indeed, after 1962, when the ELN was founded and it was decided to build guerrilla units in the departments of Cuzco, Junin and Cerro de Pasco, Peru had changed a lot. Parliamentary democracy returned and the new President, Fernando Belaúnde (elected in June 1963), proposed land reform.

The research concluded that it was not possible to organise a guerrilla in Cuzco and that the future field of action should be in the province of La Mar in the department of Ayacucho (interview, Béjar, 2003; interview, Dagnino, 2003; interview, Elias, 2008).

In April 1965, about 20 ELN militants travelled to La Mar in order to establish the Javier Heraud guerrilla front (interview, Béjar, 2003; 2008; interview, Elias, 2003; interview, Ruiz, 2008; interview, Guevara, 2008). Five months later, the ELN's main action took place: the attack and occupation of the Chapi hacienda on 25 September 1965. The action against the hacienda was not unexpected because, according to Hector Béjar, former commander of the ELN, 'Chapi was the symbol of big landowner domination throughout the area'. In addition, the action was agreed with the peasant communities of Chungui and Anjo (interview, Béjar, 2008).

The attack on the hacienda alerted the army and so, in October 1965, 'the first army patrols, small mobile groups that appear to be guerrillas' (Béjar, 1969: 90) turned up. After the attack on Chapi several other haciendas were assaulted and 'emptied'.

On 17 December 1965, a battle with the army took place. This battle was decisive and occurred just when the guerrilla force was preparing to leave the Ayacucho department and, curiously, to go to the department of Cuzco where, at the end of October, a guerrilla unit of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, Movement of the Revolutionary Left) led by Luis de la Puente was decimated. Only its commander Héctor Béjar and ELN militant Edgard de la Sota succeeded in escaping the mortal combat (interview, Béjar, 2008).

The third phase started after the arrest of Béjar in February 1966 and covers the period 1966 to 1967. This phase is the subject of this article.

Bolivia or Peru?

Guevara chose Bolivia as the starting point for the continental guerrilla struggle. The Cubans did not have a clear idea about what really had happened in the province of La

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Mar in December 1965 and in what state the Peruvian guerrilla organisation was after the arrest of its commander Héctor Béjar in February 1966, as can be deduced from the statements of Villegas, which may explain why Guevara took Bolivia as the starting point. According to Debray (1978: 69), however, Guevara's strategy did not have Bolivia as its objective.

Apart from Bolivia and Peru, Argentina was also considered an important objective in Guevara's continental guerrilla project (Debray, 1978: 74–75; Del Carmen Garcés, 2009: 47, Anderson, 2010: 643). According to Juan Pablo Chang (2004: 473), the leader of the Peruvian ELN after the defeat in 1965, the plan was that from Bolivia guerrilla units would go to Peru, Argentina and Brazil. In his diary, on 26 July 1966, Villegas (1997: 32) refers to a conversation with the Secretary-General of the PCB, Mario Monje, who promised four to ten individuals to help preparing 'things' in Peru and Argentina. Also Guevara (1977a: 85) makes reference to Argentina when he talks about the training of Argentines in Bolivia and possible explorations in the north of Argentina.

The building of guerrilla organisations in Argentina in response to the Bolivian guerrilla did not really take off. Although one can find references (Punto Final, 1972; Korol, 2002; Pastoriza, 2006: 12) regarding the creation of an ELN in Argentina in the first months of 1967 to support the guerrilla in Bolivia and also the formation of the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación (Armed Forces of Liberation), these organisations did not start military actions. However, according to Villegas (Kohan, 2003), a division of Argentinian revolutionaries had been marching to the Bolivian frontier, in support of the Bolivian guerrilla.

The Cuban individuals involved in Guevara's plans to strengthen the Peruvian ELN or to build a guerrilla centre in Bolivia have contradictory statements with regard to when exactly the decision was taken to leave Peru for Bolivia. In an interview with Néstor Kohan (2003), Harry Villegas said that Guevara did not really have the intention to go to Bolivia but wanted to go to Peru:

When we left Africa, the main line was to go to Peru. And the Bolivians committed themselves with us to give support to organise the way to go to Peru or Argentina. [...] The instructions that were given to me when I left Prague were concretely to explain to Papi that we were no longer going to Peru. That he had to explain the reasons to Sánchez – who was the representative of the Peruvian group we had in Bolivia. And all this was based on the fact that Peruvian movement was penetrated, infiltrated, as you could see from the blows they had been given. Those were the instructions they gave to me. (Kohan, 2003)

In an interview with the Cuban General William Gálvez (2004: 22), Villegas confirmed that Guevara's idea was to 'restart the armed struggle in Peru and afterwards to extend it to other countries'.

According to documents in the possession of one of Guevara's biographers Jon Lee Anderson, Harry Villegas would have already started his Bolivian diary in June 1966. In the unpublished preface one can read that the next 'adventure' would take place on Peruvian territory (Anderson, 2010: 637–638). Anderson also writes:

According to Pombo, the first alternative proposed by Che as his next destination was Peru. For this he needed the help of the Bolivians, strategically located in the neighboring country. In April – of 1966 – he sent Papi to Bolivia as advance scout with the intention to follow if he gave the 'green

light'. 'The first thing was to contact the Peruvians, to know the true state of their movement and to [get] the support of the Bolivian Communist Party', said Pombo. [...]. To this day continues the controversy over what was the true destination of the next – and last – guerrilla project of Che. According to Pombo, the plans to go to Peru were modified and one began to study the possibilities of Bolivia after his arrival with Tuma in this country. The version of Ariel is different: Piñeiro and Fidel thought already longer of Bolivia when they managed to pull Che out of his confinement in Tanzania. (Anderson, 2010: 636–637)

Ulises Estrada (Gálvez, 2004: 15) points out that Papi and Emiliano (Dawi Santiago) were sent to Bolivia to create the conditions that would allow Che to enter Peru, after having landed in Bolivia. Juan Carretero said:

In Bolivia tough political struggles had been going on and the social inequalities had multiplied; it had always been a combative people. For all these conditions it was taken as an important point, in order for him to prepare from there his entry in Peru and then in Argentina. (Gálvez, 2004: 16)

During interrogations after his arrest in April 1967 in Bolivia, Régis Debray reportedly stated that, according to Che, Peru was a better option than Bolivia (Prado, 1987: 111). The presence of Papi, the pseudonym of José María Martínez who died in the Bolivian guerrilla, in Peru, has been confirmed by Héctor Béjar. In an interview he says: 'While I was in prison here, my wife, who has died, visited me and said: "Hey, Papi says hello". Papi we called comrade Tamayo who also died with Che. Papi was his pseudonym. So, he had been here in Lima, with Juan Pablo Chang. I am talking about 1966' (interview, Béjar, 2003). The plans for a direct contribution of Guevara to the guerrilla front of the ELN in the department of Ayacucho are confirmed by ELN cadre Alain Elías and the future leader of the ELN in Puno Milciades Ruíz. Alaín Elías:

In this interval – when I returned to Lima, leaving Ayacucho in May 1965 – I and Juan Pablo Chang, who was in command of the city, had a conversation. Because I returned, I knew the situation in the mountains and so I informed him that we lacked capacity, experience and that we needed Cuban cadres that could strengthen us as they are more experienced. And when Juan Pablo Chang went to Havana, he asked me 'what can I ask?' I said that we needed people with more experience, cadres, and so we thought about Che. (interview, Elías, 2003)

Milciades Ruíz said that during one of his trips to Cuba, Juan Pablo Chang 'promised to bring Che to the group in Ayacucho, to the guerrilla of Ayacucho. When he returned in January 1966 or so, he said to me: "Che comes with us". But that was an agreement before the defeat of the guerrillas in Ayacucho' (interview, Ruíz, 2008).

The Cubans responded favourably to the request to send internationalists. In March 1966 Cuban guerrillas arrived in the city of Arica (Chile) with the aim to strengthen the guerrilla front in Ayacucho (interviews, Elías, 2003; 2008). This was too late. In February Héctor Béjar was arrested and in December the year before the guerrilla had been decimated. Julio Dagnino, a Peruvian cadre of the ELN who was sent to Arica and who played a role in the urban network of the Bolivian guerrilla (his nom de guerre was Sánchez), was informed, according to Alaín Elías, that because of the arrest of Héctor Béjar the Cubans had decided to go to Bolivia and asked the Peruvians to support them

in that country (interview, Elías, 2008). The presence of the Cubans in Arica is confirmed by the fact that in this town Juan Pablo Chang would have received money from José María Martínez. This money was brought to Lima by a person named Gallardo (Bolas) (*Presencia*, 1968). On 29 July 1966, Villegas wrote in his diary:

We informed Sánchez, the Peruvian comrade who serves as a liaison between us and Chino – the nickname of Juan Pablo Chang –, the decision of our government to begin the fight, first in Bolivia and then in Peru. We explained [to] him the fact that, for the moment, the conditions are better in Bolivia, starting with the way things have developed in his country that put an end to the armed struggle there (the death of De la Puente, the detention of Calixto – Héctor Béjar –, the disappearance of Lobatón and so forth). He perfectly understood the things. We asked him to continue working with us, that his organisation, as planned, sends men to be trained here, that they participate with the Bolivians in some of the actions and that later they would form the nucleus of the guerrilla in his country, together with some of our compatriots. (Villegas, 1997: 34–35)

On 6 August 1966, he wrote:

Two Peruvian comrades arrive with messages from Chino saying that he does not understand why priority is given to Bolivia. He believes that they, even though they are working slowly, have taken the decision to start the fight and that whatever the conditions for this are missing, they will be created. (The truth is that, in our view Ramón – Che Guevara – cannot go there, there are many things that need to be clarified, such as the capture of Calixto, the death of De la Puente, the disappearance of Lobatón and the capture [of] Gadea. It appears from the way things are going, that Calixto had turned himself in through the doctor, perhaps on the condition that they guarantee his life). (Villegas, 1997: 34–35)

On 10 September 1966, Villegas (1997: 53) noted that the Cubans in Bolivia had informed the Peruvian ELN representative in Bolivia that they would keep on working with the Peruvian ELN, although at a ‘secondary plan in relation to the things in Bolivia’.

The Location of the Bolivian Guerrilla

The Bolivian guerrilla was built in the south of the country, near the border with Argentina. Che Guevara had not been involved in the reconnaissance trips required to determine the area of action. However, before the area was finally decided, Guevara had repeatedly stated that in the north, near La Paz, they had to buy a farm. In September 1966 Régis Debray was sent to this region (Alto Beni) to make a geographical and political study, which Guevara received just before his departure from Cuba (Debray, 1978: 89–91, Villegas, 1997: 60; Gálvez, 2004: 72). The region is located approximately at the same latitude as the Peruvian department of Puno where, in the same period, ELN militants were building a guerrilla front after the defeat of the guerrilla in Ayacucho.

In the first months of 1966, the Cubans and Bolivians involved in the preparation of the guerrilla looked for a farm near the town of Caranavi, which is about three hours driving distance from La Paz. The farm had to function as a hideout and a training

centre for guerrillas who came from Cuba and were on their way to Peru (Rodríguez, 2007: 85; Vázquez-Viaña, 2008: 266). In 1965, a group of Peruvians was sent to Cuba for political and military training (interviews, Elías, 2003; 2008; interview, Pérez, 2008). The plans to purchase a farm were not completed (Soria, 2005: 235; Vázquez-Viaña, 2008: 305). However, according to Rodríguez (2007: 85) a farm was bought in the period May/June 1966. Gómez and Sánchez (1969: 52) write that mid-1966 a farm was bought in Alto Beni.

Months passed and yet it was not determined where to establish the guerrilla. This situation lasted until September 1966. According to Villegas (1997: 47), Guevara insisted on the region near the department of Puno and sent Alberto Fernández (Pacho), a Cuban who died in the Bolivian guerrilla, to Bolivia with a message dated 3 September, saying that he had chosen the region of Alto Beni (Caranavi). According to the Cuban Daniel Alarcón (Benigno), one of the survivors of the guerrilla struggle in Bolivia, training preparations in Cuba pointed to fighting in Alto Beni. Cubans received classes in the Quechua language to communicate with the indigenous people who lived there (O'Donnell, 2003: 388; Gálvez, 2004: 60). Gómez and Sánchez (1969: 52) write that it was in Alto Beni that the central revolutionary nucleus should be built.

The Cubans might have thought that Quechua was spoken in the region of Alto Beni (Department of La Paz), however, this is only partly true. Based on the 1975 census (the last census was in 1950), it is concluded that the Aymara language is mainly spoken in the departments of La Paz, Oruro and in the north of Potosí. The department of La Paz is located next to Peru (department of Puno). Quechua is spoken in, above all, the departments of Cochabamba and Potosí. In the Amazon region, for example the Department of Beni, mainly Spanish or native languages were spoken (Martínez, 1996: 14, 16–17, 22, 24). The fact that the Cuban guerrillas received classes in Quechua might ground the ‘allusion’ of Régis Debray (1978: 74) that Guevara wanted to mount a ‘second guerrilla front’ in the department of Cochabamba. In the region where finally the fight began, i.e. in the region of Ñancahuazú in the south of Bolivia, Quechua was not spoken (Debray, 1978: 86).

The fact that the population in the area of Ñancahuazú did not speak Quechua did not make communication impossible. However, it certainly questions why the Cuban guerrillas had to learn Quechua although the fighting would take place in a region where the population was speaking, apart from Spanish, a language different from Quechua. The learning of Quechua undeniably points to fighting in other regions of Bolivia and not particularly in the area of Ñancahuazú.

In Villegas’s diary one can read on 6 September 1966 that there was a plan to buy a farm in Alto Beni. Four days later he informed Guevara that the surrounding area of Santa Cruz had the best opportunities for the guerrilla (Villegas, 1997: 49, 51–52). Caranavi did not meet the requirements because nearby the farm they were planning to buy, army units were building a road (Villegas, 1997: 60). According to Manuel Piñeiro the Alto Beni option would have implied that Guevara should have had to stay longer in Cuba. Che Guevara did not want this as he believed that if he waited much more time chances would increase that the plans were leaked and that might jeopardise the continental guerrilla project (Gálvez, 2004: 72). José María Martínez, who returned to Cuba in October 1966, presented his doubts to Guevara with regard to the area south of Santa Cruz (Ñancahuazú). However, Guevara did not find any reason for postponing his contribution to the struggle. According to Guevara, Ñancahuazú was a suitable area for long training sessions. In Alto Beni it was possible to build a second guerrilla front (Kalfon, 1997: 520).

Several Cuban guerrillas confirm that it had not been the intention to fight in the area of Ñancahuazú. According to Leonardo Tamayo (Urbano), a Cuban survivor of the Bolivian guerrilla, Guevara would have thought that Ñancahuazú did not meet the guerrilla requirements. Ñancahuazú was considered as the base camp for the fighting that would have to take place far away from there (O'Donnell, 2003: 329); Ñancahuazú served as a support base (Gálvez, 2004: 106; Del Carmen Garcés, 2009: 70, 74). Harry Villegas points out that the true guerrilla struggle had to start in Alto Beni (Gálvez, 2004: 112). Also the Bolivian Rodolfo Saldaña who worked in the urban guerrilla network confirmed that the fight had to begin in the region of Alto Beni. In October 1966, Saldaña bought a farm in Alto Beni (Villegas, 1997: 66; Gálvez, 2004: 76). Also weapon depots were built in Alto Beni (Gálvez, 2004: 313).

The Peruvian ELN in the Department of Puno

The guerrilla project in the province of Sandia, located in the department of Puno, on the border with Bolivia, had a much stronger and more direct relationship with Cuba and with Guevara in particular than the guerrilla plans in the earlier stages of the ELN. As we have outlined, in the period 1961 to 1963 the Cubans provided all the facilities for a successful start of the guerrilla struggle: training, money, weapons, logistical support, and so on. In the years 1963 to 1965, the support was mainly at the level of coordination. In its third phase, i.e. the years 1966 to 1967, the ELN was completely incorporated in Guevara's continental guerrilla project.

In Guevara's *Bolivian Diary*, we can find passages that describe this 'new' relationship between the Peruvian ELN and its sister organisation in Bolivia. On 27 November 1966, Guevara (1977a: 30) wrote: 'Chino is in Bolivia and wants to send 20 men and see me. This brings disadvantages as we would internationalise the struggle before counting on Estanislao – Mario Monje, the leader of the Partido Comunista Boliviano'. On November 28 he noted: 'In the afternoon I called the Bolivian group to lay out the Peruvian request to send twenty men and all were agreed that we will send them, but after starting actions'. On December 2 we can read the following:

Early Chino arrives, very warm. We spent the day chatting. The essential: he will go to Cuba and will personally inform about the situation. Within two months five Peruvians will be incorporated, that is, when we have begun to act; for now two will come, a radio technician and a doctor who will be with us for some time. [...] I also decided to give them support to send five Peruvians to establish a connection to pass weapons to a region near Puno, on the other side of the Titicaca – a lake that Peru shares with Bolivia. (Guevara, 1977a: 32)

In the report of Juan Pablo Chang (2004) to the Cuban authorities about his conversation with Che Guevara in December 1966, one can read the following: 'He said that we could continue our own work to open a guerrilla front at the border with Bolivia in close coordination with him. That in fact we should do a vanguard work until the column of our comrades that departs from Bolivia reaches the mentioned area'.

The offer of Juan Pablo Chang to send 20 Peruvians was not an imaginary number. As a matter of fact, there was actually a group of about 20 persons affiliated with the ELN that received political and military training in Cuba. It was planned that these

guerrillas would go the guerrilla front that was being built in Puno or would receive training in Bolivia (interview, Ruiz, 2008). During his visit to Cuba in January 1967 Chang said that 30 Peruvians were waiting to receive a guerrilla training (Soria, 2005: 239). The guerrilla front in the province of Sandia was led by Milciades Ruiz. The aim of the guerrilla was, according to Ruiz, to:

provide support and serve as a strategic corridor with Che's guerrilla. Che was not going to start the guerrilla in that area – in Ñancahuazú – but near the border with Peru, in that jungle – Alto Beni. So as part of the strategy the front in Puno was being built. (interview, Ruiz, 2008)

In addition, the leader of the guerrilla front of Puno wrote that:

this mission was to establish a secret corridor between the Peruvian and the Bolivian jungle, opening a route to a place called Apolo in Bolivia. This corridor would serve as a temporary escape of the guerrilla for the repression after the actions had begun. At the same time it was a tactical escape route for the guerrilla that Che was building in Bolivia. (correspondence, Ruiz, 2008)

Regarding this issue, Alaín Elías said:

We sent cadres to Bolivia to support the guerrilla of Che. [...] Our militants who were training in Bolivia with Che would return and support what we would begin in Puno. (interview, Elías, 2003)

The guerrilla front in Puno had never really been able to develop itself. There were only five or six guerrillas available for this work, although the ELN counted on about 30 militants (interview, Ruiz, 2008). The rest of the ELN was in Bolivia or in Lima, Peru's capital city (interview, Ruiz, 2008; interview, Li, 2008; interviews, Elías, 2008). Often, Ruiz criticised his comrades in Lima because they contributed very little to the construction of the new front in Puno (interview, Ruiz, 2008). Critics on the functioning of the Peruvian ELN also came from the Cuban side. A message from Juan Carretero to Guevara, dated 13 June 1967, says:

Peruvian Capac – Milciades Ruiz –, ELN responsible for preparatory work of guerrilla nucleus in Puno, came in order to carry out the agreement, because they were without contact with Chino and without information. We explained [to] him the importance of the guerrillas of Bolivia without detailing composition, leadership, expressing its strategic content. We explained the contact of Chino with the guerrillas in order to establish agreements and Sánchez helps in supporting tasks. They gave him 25 thousand dollars to send twenty men and to continue the work of the *foco*. In La Paz, according to Capac to whom we proposed not to touch that money, Sánchez has \$48,000 that remain from what Chino had carried; that had to be waited on Chino-guerrillas' agreements and to leave the current situation to Sánchez. (Soria, 2005: 240)

On 30 June 1967, Guevara (1977a: 147) wrote that 'he received a message from Cuba in which they explain the lack of development achieved by the guerrilla organisation in Peru, where they barely have arms and men, but have spent a fortune [...]'.

The number of guerrillas in Puno was just a small percentage of the total ELN membership. This lack of manpower meant that the construction of the guerrilla front stagnated at the level of making weapon and food depots and exploring the area. The guerrillas crossed the border with Bolivia to the city of Reyes and moved weapons and ammunition from Bolivia to Peru (interview, Ruiz, 2008; interview, Li, 2008; interview, Pacheco, 2008; interviews, Elías, 2008). According to Milciades Ruiz and Antonio Pacheco, a Peruvian ELN militant who contributed to the construction of the guerrilla front in Puno, they only carried out activities of a military character (interview, Ruiz, 2008; interview, Pacheco, 2008). Antonio Li, another ELN militant that helped to build the guerrilla front, points out, however, that they also did political work. Flyers were distributed at the university in Cuzco and they painted slogans on the walls (interview, Li, 2008).

The attempt to create a guerrilla front in the department of Puno had not passed unnoticed by the Peruvian military intelligence DINTI. A secret document of 18 January 1968 reads:

During the first half of 1967, the subversive activities in the countryside were characterised by an intense work of organising groups, particularly in Paucartambo, La Convención, Manu, La Mar, Carabaya-Sandia and in lesser degree in the central and northern regions of the country, by the MIR, ELN and FALN. This activity was developed in parallel with the movement of SE of 'Bo' – Bolivia – apparently in a coordinated way and obviously encouraged by the initial successes of the guerrillas in that country. (DINTI, 1968: 3)

Logistical work took all the time. The weapons and ammunition coming from Bolivia were introduced in stages. First they were brought to a certain place directly across the border with Peru. Then, often carried by the same guerrillas – on foot and through the mountains –, they were moved into the department of Puno. In this way, a number of weapon depots were created between the Bolivian department of La Paz and the Peruvian province of Sandia. The idea was that the depots could be used by both the Peruvian and Bolivian guerrilla (interview, Calvo, 2008; interview, Li, 2008; interview, Pacheco, 2008).

On 9 October 1967, Che Guevara and Juan Pablo Chang were killed. Their deaths heralded the end of the Peruvian ELN. Although it was not until the early months of 1971 that the guerrilla organisation was dissolved – after the release from prison of ELN leader Béjar on 24 December 1970 –, the group quickly fragmented after the death of Guevara and Chang (interviews, Béjar, 2003).

Before the Bolivian disaster, the Peruvian ELN had sent, again, a contingent of about 12 revolutionaries to Cuba in order to get them trained in the tactics and the strategy of guerrilla warfare. These were not the 20 guerrillas who Chang promised to Guevara. The group of 12 went after these 20 to Cuba (interviews, Elías, 2008). So, the ELN had a total of 32 militants that were trained or had trained in Cuba. These militants could have been a very good reinforcement for the Bolivian guerrilla or even a reasonable number to create a guerrilla foco in Puno.

After the murder of Juan Pablo Chang the ELN formed a new leadership. Milciades Ruiz became general commander (interview, Pérez, 2008; interview, Ruiz, 2008; interview, Li, 2008). Now the emphasis was definitely being put on the military preparations in the department of Puno (interview, Ruiz, 2008).

The continuation of the Peruvian guerrilla would have counted on the support of the Cuban authorities (interviews, Elías, 2008). However, a month after the death of Guevara and Chang, the construction of the guerrilla front in Puno was stopped. Milcides Ruiz states:

When Che's diary fell in the hands of the enemy, it was also known that there was a guerrilla front in Puno led by Cápac. [...] So, with our presence discovered, the enemy began to search the whole area. For this reason, as a safety measure, we suspended operations in Puno. (interview, Ruiz, 2008)

Conclusions

Che Guevara was an internationalist. He considered a continental guerrilla struggle in Latin America essential not only for the survival of the Cuban Revolution, but in fact for whatever intent to free Latin America of the imperialist yoke. According to Guevara imperialism was preparing the repression of the Latin American peoples. This continental repression should be answered by a continental guerrilla struggle.

A continental guerrilla front should be erected that would be able to combat effectively imperialism and their domestic allies. This front had to be composed of various guerrilla organisations that, although acting individually, could count on some level of continental coordination.

It can be argued that Guevara's continental guerrilla project started in 1965 with the attempt to internationalise the Peruvian ELN. It was proposed, and agreed, that Guevara and Cuban internationalists would strengthen the guerrilla struggle led by the ELN in the department of Ayacucho. The defeat of the ELN in December 1965 urged Guevara to change his point of departure.

The relations between Guevara and the Peruvian ELN date from the early 1960s when this guerrilla organisation was founded in Cuba. As a matter of fact, since its foundation, the Peruvian ELN was supported by the Cuban leadership. Hence, its insertion in Guevara's continental guerrilla project is not surprising.

In the south of Bolivia a continental guerrilla base was established that had to function, primarily, as a training centre. Fighting should take place in the centre and north of Bolivia. Although Guevara changed the site for the start of the continental guerrilla struggle, the Peruvian ELN maintained its key role within the project. A new guerrilla front that would be set up in the south of Peru, in the department of Puno, would get help from Cuban internationalists.

The importance of the Peruvian ELN in Guevara's continental guerrilla project can be evidenced by, first of all, Guevara's intent to participate in the guerrilla struggle in 1965 in the department of Ayacucho. The discussions about the location of the Bolivian guerrilla front form the second proof. It can be argued that these conversations pointed to areas near the Peruvian border. In fact, it was not intended to start the guerrilla war in the south of Bolivia but in the department of Alto Beni, near the border of Peru, or in the department of Cochabamba, in the centre of the country. The third and fourth indications are the participation of militants of the Peruvian ELN in the Bolivian guerrilla led by Che Guevara, and the financial support and training facilities provided by the Cuban authorities in order to build up a guerrilla front in the department of Puno. Finally, the fifth substantiation of the importance of the Peruvian ELN in Che Guevara's continental

guerrilla project is the work of the Peruvian ELN to set up a logistical corridor, food and weapon depots, between the department of Puno and the supposed guerrilla front in the department of Alto Beni in Bolivia.

In his biography about Guevara, Anderson (2010: 636–637) refers to ‘the controversy over what was the true destination of the next – and last – guerrilla project of Che’. For this article it has not been possible to access Cuban military files. In order to get a complete picture of Guevara’s endeavours to establish a continental guerrilla front, we consider it necessary that these archives be opened for research.

Notwithstanding the ‘controversy’ as mentioned by Anderson, this article has demonstrated that Guevara’s destination was to set up a guerrilla project with continental dimensions. The Peruvian ELN played a key role in this project although, in the end, Guevara did not personally participate in the Peruvian guerrilla endeavour in the Ayacucho department.

This article has evidenced the tight military relations between the Peruvian and Bolivian ELN. Although, due to a variety of reasons, it had been very difficult to erect a guerrilla front in Puno and the fighting in Bolivia started before the guerrilla base in Puno was really established, Peruvian and Bolivian contemporary history might have been different if the preparations in Puno had been finished before Guevara and Chang were murdered.

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